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The dirty little secret about the Bush administration's decision to move U.S. troops out of Europe and Korea is what part BRAC played in these plans. BRAC is the acronym for Base Realignment and Closure Commission. It is also a sound that professional politicians in Congress dread hearing.

BRAC is a process that periodically puts in the hands of a commission which U.S. military bases should be shut down, without appeal to Congress. A fifth BRAC is scheduled for 2005. High-level Pentagon sources confide that worrying about base closing significantly influenced the decision to move troops. That seems like doing the right thing for the wrong reason.

One former Pentagon official who took part in these discussions over the last four years puts it this way: "Putting BRAC considerations up front in determining our global posture seems to be putting the cart before the horse. Strategy and defense requirements should drive the train, not whether or not we might have to close [Fort] Carson or [Fort] Riley."

It is deplorable that BRAC influenced these serious and justifiable decisions. Writing in last Thursday's Washington Post, Undersecretary of Defense Douglas Feith painted a compelling case for the Pentagon's plan. The question is whether Feith's goal -- "heavy forces being redeployed out of Europe" to make way "for lighter, more rapidly deployable, more technologically advanced forces" -- compensates for the cost and other negative factors.

Feith's essay does not mention whether the troop-moving plans will decrease pressure to close bases, but that does not mean it was not discussed behind closed doors at the Pentagon. In an era of partisanship, that pressure to maintain all 425 major installations in the United States is bipartisan and intense. The House this year voted to put off the next BRAC until 2007 in the face of a threatened presidential veto, but that provision did not reach President Bush's desk.

Fighting hard to keep military installations in their states and districts, members of Congress seized on Bush's troop-movement plan as a justification for shutting down BRAC. Rep. Heather Wilson of New Mexico, a rising Republican star and faithful Bush backer, last week wrote

Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld: "It does not make sense to go ahead with a BRAC process that was authorized before the current situation was envisaged."

BRAC also has become entangled in the presidential campaign. Sen. John Kerry voted in 2001, before he was a presidential candidate, to authorize the 2005 BRAC but has since switched positions. "I'm going to stop the next round of BRAC, for the time being," Kerry declared last week. While Kerry now attacks Bush's troop movements, on Aug. 1 he hinted at his own reductions in Korea and Europe. So the Democratic presidential nominee opposes both overseas troop movements and domestic base closures.

Members of Congress are so obsessed with keeping their bases open that they seem oblivious to bigger issues. Reducing Cold War installations around the world is long overdue. It is hard to find any legitimate argument against the Korean troop withdrawal. The South Korean government is eager for it, and Kerry's argument that this will embolden North Korea reeks of campaign hokum.

The German question is another matter. The same former senior official critical of the BRAC connection said he has "significant misgivings" about withdrawing troops from Europe: "Our heavy forces are in Europe today because it puts them closer to potential hot spots in the Middle East."

Such problems are ignored on Capitol Hill. Using the expensive overseas troop shutdown as a pretext for retaining unneeded bases is grounded in the congressional concept of U.S. military bases as jobs providers. Rep. Mark Kirk, a two-term Republican from suburban Chicago, has noted it is not the military's role to guard empty buildings, adding: "We are at war, and it's time for the Congress to treat the military budget as a defense bill and not a jobs bill." Recognizing this would rule out reducing overseas commitments for the purpose of retaining old forts at home.